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The Story of a Blood Transfusion to a Pope

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THE increasing therapeutic use that modern medicine makes of blood transfusion intensifies the attention given to its history. Several important studies inform us about it. As a matter of course we want to know the very beginning of its development, in other words, when exactly the first transfusion from man to man took place. The blood transfusion given to Pope Innocent VIII is often referred to, be it only incidentally, as in a recent paper of Maluf.¹ The Pope died on 25 July 1492. Some days previously, as the story goes, a Jewish physician had infused the blood of three ten-year-old boys, who all died soon afterwards as a result of this. I endeavoured to find out where the story originated.

Pope Innocent VIII was born in 1432 and passed his youth at the Neapolitan court. In 1484 he ascended the Holy Chair. He did not live like a saint, and he seems to have had several children to whom he gave high positions within his sphere of influence. A sarcastic epigram mentions even eight sons and eight daughters, and turns his name from Innocent to Nocens, the very opposite:

Octo nocens pueros genuit, totidemque puellas
Hunc merito poterit dicere Roma patrem.

His main concern was with power and money. During his rule almost all of the Roman Curia were backsliding into simony and immorality. His health was poor during the last years of his life. In 1488 he suffered a stroke, and in 1490 his condition was temporarily so serious that he seemed almost dead.

It is not fair to dismiss the story of the blood transfusion for theoretical reasons as does Matthew² in a book on Innocent VIII's successor, Alexander VI (1492-1503). He rejects the story for two reasons: (i) the idea of blood transfusion could not enter the mind of any person not knowing about the circulation of the blood; (ii) the fact that the blood circulates was not published till 1628. A theoretical rejection like this is not tenable. As a matter of fact the idea had been mentioned long before Harvey's discovery. In 1566 Cardanus had already³ alluded to it. He wrote that "there are some

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¹ Maluf, N. S. R. History of blood transfusion. *J. Hist. Med.*, 1954, 9, 59-107.

² Matthew, A. *Life and times of Rodrigo Borgia*. London (n.d.).

³ *Vide*: Gurlt, *Geschichte der Chirurgie*, vol. II, p. 286.

who hope that they will manage to mix the blood of a decent youth with that from another by a double fistula (others with a single) (*Sunt qui cum alio iuveni bonorum morum duplica fistula, alii unica, commutare sanguinem posse sperent*).

The story of Pope Innocent VIII's blood transfusion appears in writings of some authors of the middle of last century. Oré⁴ (1876) in a historic study on blood transfusion quotes a passage from the Italian author Villari⁵ who published a book on the life of Hieronymus Savonarola (1859). The original passage of Villari reads:

Le forze vitali d'Innocenzo VIII svanivano rapidamente: egli era più tempo caduto in una specie di sopore, cresciuto qualche volta sino al punto di farlo creder morto a tutta la corte. Si cercava invano ogni mezzo per ridestare la spenta vitalità del papa, quando un medico ebreo propose di tentare con un nuovo strumento la transfusione del sangue; cosa tentata fino allora soltanto sugli animali. Il sangue del decrepito pontifice doveva passare tutto nelle vene d'un giovane, che doveva cedergli il suo. Tre volte fu tentata la difficile prova, nella quale, senza alcun giovamento del papa, tre giovanetti perdettero successivamente la vita; forse a cagione di aria introdottasi nelle loro vene.

This is translated:

Innocent VIII was deteriorating rapidly; he had been in a sort of stupor for some time, even to such degree that all the court sometimes thought he had died. In vain they had tried anything to revive the exhausted energies. Then a Jewish physician proposed to try a blood transfusion by means of a new instrument, a thing that had hitherto never been tried except in animals. All the blood of the prostrate old man should pass into the veins of a youth who had to yield up his to the Pope. The difficult experiment was repeated three times, the result being that three boys lost their lives, without the Pope receiving any benefit of it, probably because air had penetrated into their veins.

Where did Villari get his story from? I traced it back to Gregorovius and Leo. Gregorovius⁶ wrote in his *Geschichte der Stadt Rom* (1873):

Wenn das saubere Bild des verscheidenden Medici, welchen seinen Arzt durch einen Trank von aufgelösten Diamanten vergebens zu retten suchte, einer sinnvollen Fabel von dem Werte des Reichtums gleicht, mit welchen Namen soll man wohl die Scene benennen, die am Totenbette des Papstes gespielt haben soll? Sein jüdischer Leibarzt kam auf dem Gedanken, dem Sterbenden das Lebensblut von Knaben einzuflößen; die zehnjährige Kinder gaben sich dazu um Geld her, und sie starben als Opfer dieses frevelvollen Experiments. Der Sterbende, so sagt man, gab seine Einwilligung dazu nicht; er stiesz den Arzt von sich.

⁴ Oré, S. C. *Études historiques et physiologiques sur la transfusion du sang*. Paris, 1876.

⁵ Villari. *La storia di Girolamo Savonarola*. Firenze, 1859, p. 140.

⁶ Gregorovius, F. *Geschichte der Stadt Rom im Mittelalter*, vol. VII (3), p. 297.

And Leo⁷ referred to the attempt of transfusion in a footnote in *Geschichte der Italienische Staaten*. Still, both Gregorovius and Leo, apart from mentioning the older writers Infessura and Raynaldus whom we shall discuss later, refer to Sismondi. Simonde de Sismondi⁸ was a famous historian who wrote many volumes on the history of the Italian States in the Middle Ages. In the seventh volume, first published in 1809, a vivid description of the story can be found:

Dans sa dernière maladie, Innocent VIII se laissa persuader par un médecin juif de tenter le remède de la transfusion de sang, souvent proposé par des charlatans, mais qu'on n'avait jusqu'alors jamais éprouvé que sur des animaux. Trois jeunes garçons, âgés de dix ans, furent successivement, moyennant une récompense donnée à leurs parents, soumis à l'appareil qui devait faire passer le sang de leurs veines dans celles du vieillard et le remplacer par le sien. Tous trois moururent dès le commencement de l'opération, probablement par l'introduction de quelque bulle d'air dans leurs veines, et le médecin juif prit la fuite plutôt que de s'essayer sur de nouvelles victimes.

Sismondi tells us (i) of an instrument by which the blood of the boys had to be conveyed into the old man, and his blood back into the boys' veins; and (ii) that the boys' death was probably due to air embolism (as Villari says also). Apparently it was Sismondi who introduced the story in its present version. It turns out that his vivid imagination framed unhistoric hypotheses.

The original data are to be found in the works of Infessura and Raynaldus. Stephanus Infessura wrote a diary on the city of Rome.⁹ His German translator Hefele¹⁰ regards him as a reliable author. Infessura wrote as follows:

Interea in urbe nunquam cessarunt tribulationes et mortes. Nam primo tres pueri decem annorum e venis quorum Judaeus quidem medicus, qui Papam sanum reddere promiserat, sanguinem extraxit, incontinenti mortui sunt. Dixerat namque illis Judaeus se velle sanare Pontificem, dummodo habere certam quantitatem sanguinis humani, et quidam juvenis, quem propterea extrahi jussit a tribus pueris, quibus post phlebotomiam unam ducatum pro quolibet donavit, et paulo post mortui sunt. Judaeus quidem fugit et Papa sanatus non est.

This could be translated as follows:

Meanwhile disasters and deaths did not cease in the city. For one thing, three ten-year-old boys died because blood had been taken from their veins

⁷ Leo, H. *Geschichte der Italienischen Staaten*. Hamburg, 1830, vol. IV, p. 618.

⁸ Simonde de Sismondi, J. C. L. *Histoire des républiques italiennes du moyen âge*, Paris, 1840, vol. VII, p. 289.

⁹ Infessura, Stephanus. *Diarium Romanum*, to be found in: Muratorius, L. A. *Rerum italicarum scriptores*. Mediol., 1723, vol. III, II, p. 1241.

¹⁰ Infessura, Stephanus. *Römisches Tagebuch*. Translated by Hermann Hefele. Jena, 1913.

by a Jewish physician in an attempt to cure the Pope, which he had promised to do. For the Jew said to them that he would cure the Pope provided he had a certain amount of human blood which had to be juvenile. Therefore he ordered it to be taken from the three boys, whom he gave a ducat each after the bloodletting. They died soon afterwards. The Jew fled, and the Pope was not cured.

Perusal of this passage reveals that Infessura's main intention was to describe the unrest in the town and its causes, as was the intention of the whole book. It is not the Pope's own doctor who is mentioned, but a Jewish physician. One gets the impression that a Jewish physician stayed incidentally in the city when the Pope's death was impending, and said he might save the Pope provided he had a youth's blood. Who ordered the bloodletting of the boys? In Hefele's translation the Pope did: "Worauf ihm dann der Papst befahl, dies Blut dreien Knaben heraus zu nehmen." But I do not believe that this translation is correct. The Jew is the subject of the sentence; if it were not so in the clause, it would have been indicated. One should remember that in those days a physician would not easily perform a bloodletting, this being surgeons' work. In my opinion this translation gives a biased picture of the Pope. For the rest, it should be noticed that Infessura does not tell what the Jew did with the blood. In the context the words "Papa non sanatus est" imply that it was given to the Pope in some form or other.

Now let us see what Raynaldus wrote about this story.¹¹ He said:

Laboraverat (Sc. Innocentius) diutino morbo, a biennio enim, quo torpore soporifero viginti horis sine vitae signis jacuerat, adversa valetudine fuerat usus: acciditque tum, ut cum vis morbi medicam artem eluderet, Judaeus impostor, qui valetudinem pollicebatur, a tribus pueris annorum decem, qui paulo post mortui sunt, sanguinem exhausserit, ut ex eo pharmacum stillatitium chemica arte paratum propinandum Pontifici conficeret; quod cum Innocentius rescevisset, execratus nefas, Judaeum iussit facessere, qui mox fuga supplicio se subduxit.

This could be translated like this:

He had been suffering from a protracted disease, that is, for two years, so that once he had been lying down unconscious, rigid, without any sign of life for twenty hours, his poor health wasting away; when the severity of the disease spurned all medical art it happened that a Jew, a deceiver who promised cure, tapped blood from three ten-year-old boys, who died soon after it, to compound a potion for the Pope by a chemical process. When Innocent heard of it he cursed this atrocity, and ordered the Jew to be punished, but the latter soon escaped the torture by flight.

¹¹ Baronius, Caesar. Od. Raynaldus; Jac. Laderchius. *Annales ecclesiastici*. Paris, 1877, vol. 30, p. 186.

If this representation of the facts is correct, the incident need not have made so much stir in the immediate environment of the Pope, but much more so in the city where the rumour of the boys' death quickly spread. This would explain why some authors, who must have been well informed, are silent about it,¹² e.g. Burchardus,¹³ who as a master of ceremonies was acquainted with all that was going on in the Vatican and who kept a diary, a sort of chronicle for private use, in which he recorded all that happened (for example, the orgies during Alexander VI's reign). Burchardus had no single motive for omitting the incident in his notes, but he does not mention it. The Florentine ambassador, too, who sent daily briefs about the Pope's condition to his city, does not mention it.¹⁴ Nor does the ambassador of Mantua, according to the statement of Ludwig von Pastor in his *Geschichte der Päpste*.¹⁵

So we may conclude that Sismondi has made up the story. It has survived in his version for more than a century. Indeed, consultation of the original sources proves that blood was taken from three boys (resulting in their death), but provides no ground to suppose that the blood was used for an attempted transfusion to the Pope.

¹² For example, Raphaël de Volterra (or Volaterranus, who lived from 1451 to 1522) describes in volume XXII of his *Commentariorum urbanorum libri XXXVIII* the death of Innocentius VIII, without mentioning an attempt to lengthen the life of the Pope with the blood of boys.

¹³ Burchardus, J. *Diarium Innocentii VIII*. Edited by Thuasne. Paris, 1883.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. I, note 14.

¹⁵ Pastor, Ludwig, Freiherr von. *Geschichte der Päpste*, vol. III, 1, p. 281 note.

